



The emergency industry and the shaping of innovation response capacity

Environmental and socio-economic changes facing vulnerable communities have increased the need for an approach that goes beyond emergency response to the longer term development of innovative institutions that address early warning, targeting of response, coordination and more.

Extreme weather events and outbreaks of livestock disease have been an inescapable feature of the sub-Saharan arid and semi-arid rangelands for millennia. Over hundreds of years, communities in these areas developed robust and effective systems which enabled them to survive in these harsh environments. Taking advantage of the 'good years' to increase their animal numbers, splitting animals between different herds and flocks to spread the risk, migrating with the seasons to take advantage of localized rainfall, observing traditional rangeland management practices such as respecting dry season grazing areas, and even raiding neighbouring communities to seize livestock. All this in the sure knowledge that eventually they would be confronted by a severe drought, widespread floods, or an outbreak of disease which would decimate their herds and flocks and even cause loss of human life.

A new norm

It is now almost universally accepted that extreme weather events, including droughts and floods, are increasing throughout the world as part of a broader pattern of climate change. Many experts believe that the arid and semi-arid regions of the Horn of Africa will be particularly hard hit by these changes, and that the region will also become steadily drier. This climatic stress comes on top of other pressures that the communities living in these areas have had to absorb in recent decades: reduced mobility and loss of dry season grazing areas due, for example, to the creation of protected areas; settlement of agricultural communities in traditional pastoralist areas; regional insecurity and rapid population growth. Now there are simply not enough 'good' years to allow herds and flocks to recover from the shocks: traditional responses and coping mechanisms are increasingly failing.

Yet, despite being labelled as 'emergency situations', droughts and livestock disease outbreaks have in fact now become one of the main rural development problems. Continuing to treat these recurrent events as 'emergencies' is no longer helpful or appropriate. This is the new norm. Faced with this new norm, there needs to be a shift away from dependency on external agencies with their annual 'emergency' relief interventions. Instead a new approach is needed - one that builds the long-term capacity of all the actors: the public sector, civil society, pastoral communities, regional and international bodies, the donor community and the private sector, to respond to a diverse range of shocks which occur with varying periodicity.





A self-fulfilling prophecy?

There are, however, strong vested interests in continuing to treat these episodes as emergencies. Frequent emergency responses have spawned a large, profitable and influential aid industry. Governments of affected countries have grown accustomed to declaring national emergencies and routinely appealing for international assistance. Considering shocks as extraordinary events has inhibited the emergence of the social and institutional arrangements to cope with these conditions.

Studies of recent responses to emergencies in the Horn of Africa show that emergency response continues to be predominantly implemented in a narrow 'rescue and relief' fashion. The focus is invariably on 'hard' capacities such as infrastructure, technical skills and physical resources, such as vaccines or animal feeds. Relatively little emphasis is given to the 'soft' elements of capacity, particularly with respect to the following two aspects.

First are the arrangements and attributes that lead to rapid response: the factors that allow a timely response in a rapidly changing environment are crucial. This implies that response capacity must both include mechanisms for early warning of up coming changes, as well as those for dealing with the opportunities and challenges that arise from these.

Second is the specificity of the response: the response has to be tailored to the specific characteristics of the opportunity or challenge as well as the context of the response.

Small steps

Recent pilot initiatives in the Horn that have broken the 'rescue and relief' mould show that such changes in interactions and habits often fuel the creative use of ideas, technology and information from different sources. This in turn can stimulate locally-specific action around production, utilisation, processing and distribution of livestock, generating new services and production arrangements. Whilst clearly showing its potential, such 'experimentation' has, thus far, been too limited in its nature and scope to have a significant impact on the emergency industry. But it has posed the question as to: what policy and development interventions would create a landscape that would promote building such capacity.

A first crucial step to addressing this problem is for policy makers to acknowledge that fundamental changes have taken place which represent a new normality, and that significant revision of the paradigms that have, thus far, dominated sector thinking is required. These are small steps for decision makers and practitioners but they would represent a giant leap for the affected communities.

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